

Paradox lost

Garrison Keillor's 'Book of Guys' ponders men's frantic attempts to be sensitive

The Book of Guys
Garrison Keillor
Viking
340 pages; \$22

Humorist Garrison Keillor's latest book is a mixed bag of characters who are sometimes quite funny and other times lost in whimsical overkill. Fortunately, there's more fun here than disappointment.

The theme is maleness in the 1990s — guys under siege for their macho behavior, lack of sensitivity

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and overdoing of competitiveness. His characters are consistently pitiful, but there often arises the uneasy feeling that

Keillor isn't altogether happy with the concept of the more sensitive man.

Keillor writes: "We go around with a sense that our gender peaked in the 18th century. The King, the Court, the Church, Knighthood, Guilds — all of that worked for guys: In paintings by the Old Masters, guys looked good, whether boy or burgher, hearty and flush, good-humored, bold, prosperous, Guys at Their Best. After that, guys vanished from art, except for troubled self-portraits. Now our gender supplies all the major criminals and all the major candidates for high office; the female gender supplies the goddesses of light and mercy."

Keillor offers the suggestion that part of the sexual identity problem is that little girls get more opportunities to play indoors and the boys are shoved outside to play war games because they're boisterous. He suggests, tongue-in-cheek, that "girls stayed inside and played with dolls, creating complex family groups and learning to solve problems through negotiation and role-playing. Which gender is better equipped, on the whole, to live an adult life, would you guess?"

Keillor answers his question with a collection of eccentric misfits, each with a story to tell: The mayor of a small town is harassed by the local newspaper and his public image slips, but it seems to improve his sex life; a former football star finds fame and happiness of a sort as the most obese man in the world; and a wildly popular writer of sugary self-help books gets arrested for molesting young girls.

Always, Keillor's sense of irony is at work. Even



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Stories by

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the old god of, as Keillor puts it, "wine and whoopee." Dionysus, finds that orgies and excess take their toll after 50, and Zeus promotes him to chairman of wine; no more "nubile young women" as he takes over the wine board to "organize wine programs, formulate wine goals."

Another of his characters feels the pain of aging during a flight in first class to Antigua: "The flight attendants wore gold-paisley sarongs slit up the side and pink-passion lipstick, they were Barnard graduates (*cum laude*) in humanities, and they set a vase of fresh roses on my table, along with the ceviche and salmon loaf and crab puffs with Mornay sauce, and . . . I knew that they only flirted with

me because I was holding a first-class ticket; I wanted to say, 'I'm 47, I'm broke, ashamed, in pain, on the verge of divorce and sponging off a despised relative. I've hit bottom, babes. Buzz off.'"

At times, Keillor seems to feel frantic images will do the trick with the reader, but they sometimes get out of hand. A character's mother is devoured by black flies, his brother is chopped into small pieces by his auto's fan, his sister sees tiny people in the bath bubbles and ends up in an asylum, his father is thrown into a boiling tub by an angry lobster.

Keillor has always been at his best with his Lake Wobegon characters — they're caricatures but recognizable as people we know. He's wise to not rely on Wobegon for a whole career, of course, but he appears to be reaching a bit too far in some of these vignettes about basically dislikable people. That may be what troubles this reader; most of these characters are people we don't want to know: a bickering husband and wife on a desert island, for example.

The funniest selection here is one that deals with the familiar, for Keillor — radio. A young man of indifferent talents wants to work for WBE, a station that features such stars as Montana Montez, who plays Avis Burnham, a frontier librarian who never lets the lawless, gun-toting cowhands get away with overdue books.

Montez finally achieves success on a Duluth, Minn., radio station by playing records and being his lonely self: "I am single on that show. Everyone else in radio talks with the voice of marriage and duty. I speak with the voice of one who eats his dinner at an odd time out of white cardboard containers while standing at the kitchen counter and reading the sports page. People sense this. They recognize it in my voice: a man who keeps his clean socks and shirts on the dining-room table and spreads newspapers on the floors to keep the dust off them."

Underneath the comic images, Keillor is writing about the compromise and complication that come with human relationships and is pointing out that, despite the loneliness, there can be more freedom in aloneness than when one is loved. It's a world of paradox Keillor considers, and while he doesn't always hit the mark, he's funny enough to make his readers consider yet again the essential foolishness of the human condition. ♦

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